Title Registration for a Systematic Review:
First Language-Mediated Strategies for Improving Linguistic Proficiency and Academic Attainment for Bilingual Children Aged 4-11 in Non-Bilingual Schools: A Systematic Review
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TITLE OF THE REVIEW

First Language-Mediated Strategies for Improving Linguistic Proficiency and Academic Attainment for Bilingual Children Aged 4-11 in Non-Bilingual Schools: A Systematic Review.

BACKGROUND

Global trends in transnationalism and migration have contributed to a steady rise in the number of children in schools across the world receiving their education in a language other than the one they speak at home. For example, in the UK more than 1,000,000 children in state funded education (approximately 20% of the total) are officially designated as learners of English as an additional language (NALDIC 2015). In the USA a similar proportion of the population speak a language other than English at home (United States Census Bureau 2015). In addition to domestic growth in linguistic diversity in anglophone countries, there is an exponential rise in the number of international schools across the globe that use English as the medium of instruction for children whose home languages are something else (Dixon 2012). Teachers in these contexts have a clear responsibility to adopt strategies that have been shown to be effective in raising attainment of children who are learning in a language over which they have yet to develop mastery.

One strategy that has been advanced to meet that end is the ‘systematic’ use of students’ first languages (L1s) as a way to support learning of and learning in their second language (L2s). However, there is longstanding and unresolved collective uncertainty over the effects of this approach. Some people argue that bilingual children’s L1s serve as a helpful scaffold in these contexts. Other people believe that the presence of children’s L1s detracts from their L2 learning.

By way of example, pedagogic advice like this

“...use the students’ first language to explain the key points of the text; in the case of a narrative, tell the story in the students’ first language prior to having them read it in English.” (Gibbons, 2009, p. 92),

is circulated to teachers in schools with language policies that contain statements like this

“English will be spoken in all areas of the school throughout the school day from 8am to 4pm (including breaks) by all students (including Primary)” (Bromsgrove International School, 2011).

Much of the evidence underpinning the assumption that L1 is a useful tool in the learning toolkit of a bilingual child is derived from the findings of studies comparing the effects of bilingual schools with the effects of English-only schools. Systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and combinations of the two that summarize relevant primary research consistently conclude that bilingual schools have a positive, if modest, effect on pupils’ L2 proficiency and
their academic attainment (Willig 1985, Greene 1997, McField 2002, Rolstad, Mahoney and Glass 2005, Slavin and Cheung 2005, and Krashen and McField 2005). However, it does not necessarily follow that the positive effects on language learning and academic attainment observed in bilingual schools can be replicated in non-bilingual schools. In particular, the effects of using ‘stand-alone’ strategies based on assumptions about the mechanisms at work in bilingual schools are unclear. I am aware of only one study that directly compares ‘stand-alone’ L1 mediated teaching approaches with alternative, English-only approaches in young learners (Chalmers 2014). This was a randomised trial that compared the effects of asking bilingual children to discuss the content of a picture book in their L1 with the same task conducted in English only on the quality of their subsequent retelling of that story in English. This trial did not detect a statistically significant difference in outcomes between groups.

Such is the prevalence of the assumption that L1-mediated learning approaches in non-bilingual schools are helpful to bilingual learners, and such is the apparent scarcity of empirical evidence to inform that position, that a systematic review to locate, appraise and synthesise any additional relevant studies is desirable if teachers are to be confident that their energies and resources are being directed appropriately.

This systematic review will locate, describe and summarize empirical evidence that compares the use of ‘stand-alone’ L1 strategies with alternative approaches for primary and pre-school-aged bilingual learners in non-bilingual schools so that teachers and schools are better-informed when deciding on the approach to take.

**OBJECTIVES**

What is the extent and nature of empirical research into the effects of using primary and pre-school bilingual learners’ first language as a pedagogical tool in non-bilingual school contexts?

If there are sufficiently similar data available, of adequate trustworthiness, what is the magnitude and direction of the effects of adopting L1-mediated approaches to learning in L2 contexts?

**EXISTING REVIEWS**

I have been unable to locate any systematic reviews of research addressing this question.

**INTERVENTION**

Studies eligible for inclusion will be those that compare L1-mediated teaching approaches with alternative approaches that use only L2. By way of illustration, a study that compares the effects of giving Spanish L1 students a bilingual Spanish/English dictionary with giving them a monolingual English dictionary on the sophistication of their English writing would be considered for inclusion. Only studies that assess the effects of the intervention on
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substantive educational outcomes, expressed in terms of L2 proficiency or academic attainment, will be considered for inclusion. The effects of bilingual schools and programmes are well covered in the existing research literature (see above), therefore studies that compare officially designated bilingual programmes to L2-only programmes, or that take place in officially designated bilingual schools, will not be included. Only studies of interventions will be considered for inclusion. For example, studies that analyse existing datasets, or studies of theory, will not be included.

**POPULATION**

Populations will be primary or pre-school-aged children whose home language is different to their school language (including so called ‘balanced bilinguals’: children who are equally proficient in more than one language). Typically, the age range of this population is from about 4 to 11 years old. However, primary and pre-school provision differs from country to country, so the arbiter for inclusion will be the age range of compulsory primary/elementary education (including preschool) at the time of the study for the country in which the study was conducted. Studies of populations meeting this criterion from any country in the world, with any combinations of L1 and L2, will be considered for inclusion.

**OUTCOMES**

Outcomes will be substantive measures of either linguistic proficiency in L2 or demonstrations of academic knowledge, mediated through L2. By way of illustration, appropriate outcomes will include measures of the quality and precision of L2 writing, comprehension of L2 texts, and demonstration of understanding of curriculum content (for example, describing the stages in the life cycle of a butterfly, or knowing the names of geographical features in the local area). Advice to teachers, such as that quoted in the ‘Background’ section above, is articulated in the belief that it improves children’s attainment at school. Proxy outcomes for attainment, such as student enjoyment of a lesson or data from fMRI scans, do not assess student attainment directly and, therefore, will not constitute an outcome of interest for this review.

**STUDY DESIGNS**

Experience of the field suggests that high quality study designs, such as randomised trials, are not common. In order to meet the first stated objective of this review - to describe the extent and nature of relevant empirical research - study designs will not constitute a *prima facie* reason for inclusion or exclusion. The literature is likely to include a range of designs, including randomized trials, non-randomized comparisons, interrupted time series and single group pre and post designs. The differential trustworthiness of these alternative designs will be acknowledged and assessed using a version of the the Effective Public Health Practice Project Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies (Thomas et al. 2004),
adapted for use with studies in education. These assessments will be considered in the synthesis of the included literature.

REFERENCES


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ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

This review is being carried out as a part of my doctoral research. Therefore, all roles will primarily be carried out by me, Hamish Chalmers. Advice and support will be sought from my supervisory team and other colleagues at Oxford Brookes University, as well as colleagues at other institutions, who have extensive experience of systematic reviewing.

FUNDING

I am a funded doctoral student at Oxford Brookes University. My funding is from the university itself. This funding is in the form of a maintenance grant for the duration of my studies, and is not specific to the preparation of this systematic review. This funding will cease in January 2018. No extra funding has been sought.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

My MA dissertation (see references) was primary research addressing this question.

PRELIMINARY TIMEFRAME

Note, if the protocol or review are not submitted within 6 months and 18 months of title registration, respectively, the review area is opened up for other authors.

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• Date you plan to submit a draft review: December 2016
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Form completed by: Hamish Chalmers Date: 29 April 2016